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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the process involved in attempting (unsuccessfully) to establish a private elementary school for gifted students in New Hampshire. Individual sections address the following aspects of the process: the birth of the idea in a Saturday and summer program for gifted children; the local area demography and probable demand for such a school; a formal needs assessment survey of the families who had attended the prior program; formation of committees with parents, teachers, and Board members; determination of the school's mission; the search for a suitable location; the search for funding to supplement tuition; establishment of admissions criteria; identification of suitable teachers; establishment of the curriculum; acquisition of materials and supplies; and publicity activities including development of a brochure. The paper concludes by noting that, despite all the effort put into the project by more than 50 people, the school was not able to open as planned in 1989 due to an inability to find a suitable location, a downturn in the local economy, and departure of the proposed school's director. It is suggested that the Charter Schools movement may provide better opportunities for similar projects today. (DB)

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HOW TO START YOUR OWN SCHOOL?

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PRIVATE SCHOOL BACKGROUND

There are currently 24,690 private elementary and secondary schools in the United States serving an estimated 4,463,878 students in kindergarten through grade 12 (Gerald et al., 1992, McLaughlin, 1995). That makes nearly 1 out of every 10 students being in private schools. One of the advantages of a private school is that the average private school is about half the size of the average public school which offers a greater sense of community (Conway, 1994). A disadvantage is given by Money Magazine (Topolnicki, 1994) in a survey of private schools which found that public school teachers had stronger academic qualifications than private school teachers and the best public schools had a more challenging curriculum and about the same class size as most private schools. Shanker (1991) gave additional data on achievement also.

In a study of full-time schools/programs for the gifted, both private and public, by the author, it was found that private schools were better on acceleration and public schools were ahead on offering critical and creative thinking. On integrative learning there were no differences.

BIRTH OF AN IDEA

Any person or group can start a school if willing to take on the challenges involved in doing so. In 1989, the Director of KIDS COLLEGE (KC), a Saturday and summer program for gifted children in New Hampshire, looked at the possibility of starting a school after being approached by a number of parents who wanted to see the same type of program offered on a daily basis for their children.

AREA BACKGROUND

Gifted programs in New Hampshire were in the minority in the public schools and often offered a very limited program. There are also not many private elementary schools other than parochial schools in the area though a small elementary school for the gifted had just shut down after 3 years (the location was not very accessible to many parents). Kids College had been attracting about 150 children each session, four times a year for accelerated and enriched programs. A large number of high technology companies (Digital Computer and Sanders Electronics, etc.) have located in New Hampshire with employees who have the education and salaries to afford private school. New Hampshire is also known for their large number of new businesses started, and entrepreneurs. The climate was right for a school for gifted children.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A survey was sent out to the 356 families who had previously attended KIDS COLLEGE to ascertain if there was a need for a school. The returns showed there was a need, particularly at the pre- and primary-age.

Since KIDS COLLEGE was a non-profit group, they were able to consider the school as an addition of their mission to bring a special educational focus to gifted students. A database of over 475 students from 72 towns who had attended the program had been gathered after 8 years of running KIDS COLLEGE.

The enthusiasm came mostly from parents who were dissatisfied with their child's existing education in the public schools. New Hampshire has not provided regular funds for gifted education to the local schools so there was not the pressure to program for these children unless federal or some state grant money set up programs.

COMMITTEES FORMED

Committees were set up in the fall of 1988 with KIDS COLLEGE parents, teachers, and Board members who volunteered to meet on a regular basis to look at different aspects of starting a school:

- Mission Statement/Goals
- Admissions - Who would be chosen
- Location
- Teachers/Personnel
- Equipment, Supplies, Materials
- Funding - Tuition, Donations, Grants
- Curriculum
- Publicity/Brochure

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Committees met regularly to gather information during the fall and winter of 1988/89. The Board of Directors for KIDS COLLEGE was actively involved along with the Director, Joan Witham, in all the committees in order to coordinate the results. Parents from education, real estate, business, and finance offered their expertise at the meetings. There was much enthusiasm and excitement with the idea of having a school that would really meet the gifted child's needs.

MISSION OF THE SCHOOL

The mission for the school was seen as continuing the high level of programs that had been offered only on a Saturday or summer 2 week basis. This included accelerated math programs and enrichment in different areas that picked up on the students' interests.

Manchester Academy will offer high academic standards and challenge with advanced material, and an accelerated and creative learning environment. We want to enhance your child's talents and gifts so they will have the confidence, knowledge, and skills to function now and in the future world. A low-teacher-student ration gives children the attention they need to progress at their own level in an ungraded classroom. The individual development of your child will be identified and advanced with pre-and post-testing of materials. Student interests are encouraged with a specific time each day to do research and problem solving.

The school would not discriminate on the basis of race, color, sex, national or racial origin, which is a standard caveat with all non-profit groups..

LOCATION

The locations committee was most urgent as a place was needed that would be suitable for all our parents who came from all over southern New Hampshire to meet in the 4 different colleges in 3 different cities where KIDS COLLEGE classes were held. Manchester was chosen as being more centrally located. A location close to the central artery US90 which travels North/South through the center of NH was looked for. Because of the boom in technology in NH, rental of buildings large enough for our school were in short supply. We looked at churches and preschools, the YMCA, old mill buildings, businesses, etc.

Three classrooms were planned for the first year with a preschool class for ages 3-5, with an ungraded primary (ages 6-8) and an intermediate class (9-11). The location had to be open to expansion as the program grew.

New Hampshire has very few state laws governing private schools. Private elementary schools had only to meet state requirements for safety and fire standards but we then needed to follow state codes in relation to preschoolers with 35 sq. feet per student, being on a ground floor, etc. Local zoning laws had to be considered when thinking of putting a school in a business district. Rental money was also a consideration as we wished to keep tuition within reach of our parents.

FUNDING

After much research and checking of available sources, it was found that the school would have to be funded mostly from tuition. This had to be within reach of most of our potential families. KIDS COLLEGE Saturday classes were \$10 for a 2 hour class and \$100 for a 2 week program that offered classes for 2 1/2 hours daily for 10 days. That brought the program within reach of many of our NH families. A school would have to charge more. Area schools were contacted to check the range of tuition and services offered. It was decided on a full-day tuition of \$3500 and preschool half day tuition of \$1800.

The committee looked into both state and federal funding but came up lacking as we were a private school. A full-time fund-raiser and grant writer was considered but found to be too expensive. We had hoped since we wished to be a model school and link up with a university or college to train teachers that would give us more linkages but it did not turn up immediate possibilities.

KIDS COLLEGE would be able to siphon some funds through to the school that would not be used for its expenses but this was not a large amount. Donations, either in money or in equipment or supplies, were looked for from nearby industries. A commitment was looked for on a continuous basis. All took precious time.

ADMISSIONS

Since KIDS COLLEGE already had an identification criteria set up, it was decided to continue it. Entrance criteria was if the child:

1. was in a gifted program in public schools
2. has an IQ of 125 or above
3. was in the 9th stanine or 90th% in achievement testing
4. has a special talent (show documentation)

An entrance interview of the child was also planned to better come to know the needs and talents of each child. The school did not feel that they could handle special problems of emotionally disturbed or learning disabled children the first year but hoped to work with the learning disabled gifted in the second year as we had some interest in that area from parents.

ORGANIZATION/TEACHERS

Since who teaches the classes is so important, it was decided to not only contact current and past teachers in KIDS COLLEGE but also to advertise in the Boston Globe and Manchester/Nashua NH newspapers to reach the widest circulation. A mixed committee of parents, KC Director, and a board member sifted through the responses then interviewed the most promising certified teachers. Three teachers were contacted as to their availability when the school opened.

The current Director would oversee the school as well as KIDS COLLEGE. A Board of Advisors made up of educational consultants, parents, teachers, and business experts would help guide the school. A Parent Group would help the school also in a variety of ways from volunteering their talents and assistance in the classrooms to chairing various committees.

CURRICULUM

The Manchester Academy was based upon the Seattle Country Day School which is located at the University of Washington. They had been kind enough to share information about their program which seemed to fit into the goals set up by our founders. There was to be strong math/science emphasis because of the strong feelings of many parents who did not find it in their own public schools. Integrated learning was emphasized, reading was to include much literature, and writing would be done daily. The rich community resources of art museums, Science Center, etc. would be integrated into the curriculum. The program was to be individualized according to each child's talents and pace of learning. Hands-on learning and real-life applications were to be emphasized. In keeping with the technology-based community, computers, video cameras, and other technology were to be used extensively.

It was also decided to follow the New Hampshire proposed school schedule of classes in order to facilitate parents who had children in both public and private schools. An after-school program was considered for working parents. This could offer hobby classes or an opportunity to receive help in homework.

MATERIALS/SUPPLIES

Local stores and schools were canvassed for bargain or second hand disks and chairs. School catalogs were checked for equipment and materials. Books were looked at that would fit the curriculum set for the ungraded primary. Since KIDS COLLEGE had 10 Apple II computers already that were only used on Saturdays and had been placed in a nearby school, these were available along with a large amount of computer software that had been donated by a local computer magazine. Having them in the Academy would also mean they could continue to be used for Saturday and summer classes. Many of the crafts, paper, and other materials from KIDS COLLEGE could also be shared with the Academy.

A liaison was set up with a nearby prep school to bus our kids with their students, which alleviated buying buses and facilitated working parents' schedules.

PUBLICITY/BROCHURE

A name had to be decided upon before putting any publicity out. It was finally decided to call it the Manchester Academy, since it was to be in Manchester and academy gave more of the status of a private school. A brochure was put together as the committees reported in with their findings. It included the philosophy, entrance criteria, tuition, school schedule, school policy, organization of the school, and general curriculum (see Brochure). This was sent out to all families on the KIDS COLLEGE database, possible donors, and prospective landlords. An article was placed in the two major newspapers in the area concerning the opening of the school.

CONCLUSION

After all the work put into this project by over 50 people, the school was unable to open because of not finding a suitable location in time for the 1989 opening. The specific problem was in finding a location that was easily assessable to the main artery in New Hampshire that would meet the needs of a school, costs, and the local codes. The recession then took over in New Hampshire and the Director left to pursue a doctorate in gifted education so the driving force was gone. A good idea did not come to fruition.

CHARTER SCHOOLS A POSSIBILITY

Today with the Charter Schools movement (140 now in US, Contracting... 1995), school boards can contract with independent organizations, both private and public) to run schools. Schools are paid per-student and all teachers are employed by the schools (not districts). Some restrictions are given depending upon the state but in most cases the schools may choose their own curriculum. Funding is usually given on a yearly basis and may not continue if students do not achieve or for other reasons set by school boards.

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HOW TO START YOUR OWN SCHOOL

Mission/Goals

Admissions

Who would be chosen?

Location

Curriculum

Teachers/Personnel

Materials

Equipment, Supplies, etc.

Funding

Tuition, Donations, Grants

Publicity/Brochure